

UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY

THE ECLIPSE OF THE COUNTERTENOR VOICE:
A STUDY IN GENDER AND SOCIETY

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
A DEGREE WITH HONORS

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ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

19 DECEMBER 2003

Abstract

This paper examines the period from 1660 to 1890, investigating the several causes for the decline of the countertenor (or male alto voice) in London's theaters. Changes in politics, gender roles, masculine archetypes, societal demographics, physiology and musical style combined to effectively bar countertenors from the stage. They were replaced sequentially by castrati and heroic tenors, each successive voice symbolizing and in some ways embodying the virtues and acceptable vices of its respective age.

This paper will explore the main factors that effected the eclipse of the countertenor voice through the use of personal journals, music criticism, newspapers and the music itself.

In English Restoration musical theater, countertenors routinely sang in substantial roles. From its position of general acceptance in the early 18th Century, however, the theater countertenor underwent a gradual decline for a variety of reasons and disappeared almost entirely by the mid 19th Century, surviving only in the cloistered settings of the church and university choirs. This paper will explore and demonstrate the several causes of that decline. More than any other factor, London society's increasing consciousness of a 'third gender,' and the countertenor's association with that idea, led to the voice's decline. The rise of other voice types, most notably castrati, women, and heldentenors, was closely interwoven into London's gender consciousness, influencing the voice's decline through both displacement and derogation. Additionally, long-term physiological changes in the European male created a situation conducive to the audience's growing perception of the countertenor as effeminate, while changes in concert hall size and orchestration rendered the voice's tones less effective. Together, these factors caused the eclipse of the countertenor as a legitimate solo theater performer.

In the world of musical cognoscenti, the precise definition of a countertenor has become subject to heated and bitter debate;¹ outside of that rarified realm, few know of the voice's existence, and still fewer know exactly what it is. For the sake of all parties, a working definition is needed. I make no claim to a universal definition, only one that will suffice for the clarity of this paper. To that end, a 'countertenor' refers to an adult male who has never suffered castration, and who sings primarily in the alto range either in a

¹ For an enlightening introduction to several sides of the vigorous debate, see Laura E. DeMarco, "The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor," *Music & Letters* 86:1 (2002): 174; and Peter Giles, *The History and Technique of the Counter-Tenor: a Study of the Male High Voice Family* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994) for a contrasting view.

well-developed falsetto, or in an unusually high and light-toned head voice. This paper is concerned with perceptions of performance and their relation to the concept of gender; the precise method of vocal production is not nearly as important as the critic's and audience's perception of its quality and gendered subtext. For that reason, the purist's distinctions between a falsettist, male alto, tenorino, tenor altino, haute-contre, contratenor, counter-tenor and countertenor are moot. Since the exclusive use of the 'pure' countertenor voice² dropped out of theater use in the 1780's, I will examine attitudes toward the non-exclusive³ use of the falsetto voice from that point until the late 19th Century.

The countertenor voice is not simply an issue of range. The same person can very easily sing a given tone in either the modal (chest) or falsetto register;⁴ however, the volume, tone color, and many other qualities differ.⁵ Even within each register, there remains substantial room for variation, though the position of the tone in a singer's range will affect the quality. The heroic tenor (heldentenor),⁶ though not fully developed until

² By 'pure' countertenor I mean falsetto carefully mixed with a high, light head voice.

³ That is, falsetto as a secondary voice and the normal chest voice as the primary voice.

⁴ Michael Kennedy, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (Oxford, University Press, 1985). s.v. "register: (3) The part of the compass of an instrument having a distinctive tonal quality... (4) Part of vocal compass, e.g. chest voice, high register, etc."

⁵ Johan Sundberg and Carl Högset, "Voice Source Differences between Falsetto and Modal Registers in Counter Tenors, Tenors and Baritones," *Log Phon Vocol* 26 (2001):26-36.

⁶ Just as there are a plethora of nuanced distinctions within the male alto range, distinctions also proliferate in other ranges, the tenor among them. Purists may argue that the 9th Symphony uses a *tenore robusto*, but my intent here is to simply convey that the tenor voice was moving towards the Wagnerian heldentenor. *Oxford Dictionary of Music*,

the time of Wagner and Verdi, had its first notable stirrings on the Continent with Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Choral Symphony (the 9th). These more vigorous styles eventually emigrated to London. Michael Kelly, who began his London career in 1787 after several years of continental performance, was the first London stage tenor to omit falsetto singing,⁷ setting an important precedent. Although many tenors retained the use of their falsetto after Kelly, his exclusive use of 'natural' voice eventually became more or less *de rigueur*.

Five separate voice types can sing the same pitch; which voices sing on stage is evidence of that society's taste and testifies indirectly about the society itself. The boy alto's voice is distinguished from other voices in the same range by a 'strait' tone, a lack of vibrato, and a breathy sound at lower pitches.⁸ As compared to the boy alto, the contralto, or adult female alto, has potential for a far richer sound, greater discretion in the use of vibrato, a longer career and greater skill. The castrato alto voice was created by castrating a vocally promising youth, thereby altering his physiological development and preserving his voice. Although castration for artistic purposes has fallen into disrepute and out of use, contemporary critics claimed it well worthwhile,⁹ describing a

s.v. "Heldentenor": "(Ger., 'heroic tenor'). Tenor with powerful voice of wide range," et cetera.

⁷ Roger Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: University Press, 1986), 630.

⁸Michael Mauldin, "Range," accessed online at [http://www.boychoirs.org/brc/library/article007.html] 02 November 2003.

⁹"The instant [boys] begin to know their business, lose their voices, and it is allowed...that their performance, on account of their youth and inexperience, must inevitably be devoid of taste, judgment, and grace...I hardly ever heard a boy sing without receiving more pain than pleasure. The *soprani* [soprano castrati] of the present

voice with extended range and ethereal quality. The heroic tenor voice is distinguished mainly by its power and wide range, but unlike the other voices here discussed, rarely reaches a high C (that is, a C₅).¹⁰ Finally, the range of the countertenor also overlaps with portions of these other voices.¹¹ Although all of these voice types can sing in a common range, they vary greatly in tone quality and the way in which a society interprets and welcomes the idea of each. An audience hears the boy alto voice as pure and angelic, typified by a young David in *The Chichester Psalms*; an audience hears the heldentenor as the epitome of powerful masculinity, represented by any of the leading tenors from Wagner's fifteen operas. The other voices capable of singing in the alto and high tenor range have met with a response more varied than these two voices at the extremes. Whether aware or subconscious, a society's idea of the character of each voice crosses over to its characterization of the singer who produces it, and that characterization inevitably changes with time.

Together with these changing societal interpretations, long-term biological change in European males influenced the decline of the countertenor voice. Ever since the Middle Ages, the average European male's height has been increasing, and both the age

times, being...persons of mature age, and judgment, sing with such science, expression, and taste as to ravish every hearer of sensibility." Delle Valle in *Discourse* (no date cited), quoted at great length by Dr. Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, ed. Frank Mercer (New York: Dover, 1937), 2: 531. Works cited or quoted in other works, such as this one, will only appear in the footnotes, and not in the bibliography.

¹⁰ This paper will use the notation of [note][octave], such that middle C (approx. 262 Hz) would be written C₄, double that frequency (one octave), C₅, and so on.

¹¹ In addition to demonstrating the relatively uncontested fact that several different voices are capable of singing in the same range, Sundberg and Högset analyze the differing methods of vocal production and the impact these methods have upon tone quality. Sundberg and Högset, 26-36.

at which his voice breaks and the average pitch where it settles have been decreasing. It would seem that the age of a boy's voice breaking would be immaterial, as this paper concerns itself with the adult male voice and not that of adolescents. However, if a boy's voice broke in his late teens,¹² he would have had far more training in singing the alto and soprano parts. Consequently, singing countertenor would be far more familiar and natural,¹³ and countertenors, therefore, more prevalent.

The voice's final disposition is of more direct concern than when it broke. Although the absence of a universal pitch¹⁴ precludes absolute certainty about the correlation between the written note and the sung (or played) note before the mid 19th Century, it is certain that the range and prevalence of the bass is a comparatively recent development.¹⁵ The bass part in a 12th Century setting of the Passion¹⁶ has a range from

¹² Herbert Moller, "Voice Change in Human Biological Development," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16:2 (1985): 245, accessed online at [<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-1953%28198523%2916%3A2%3C329%3AVCIHBD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>] on 13 February 2003.

¹³ "Singers whose voices broke more rapidly find greater difficulty in producing the typical 'counter-tenor' tone. This is one or several reasons which make research into the vocal aspect of puberty overdue." David Wulstan, *Vocal Colour in English Sixteenth-Century Polyphony*, (No City Listed: Plainsong and Medieval Music Society, 1966), p. 25; see also David Wulstan, *Tudor Music* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 223-5. Quoted in Giles, 59.

¹⁴ "Before [1859], a variety of pitches existed. In England in the 16th Century, domestic keyboard pitch was about 3 semitones lower than today's pitch and the church music pitch over 2 semitones higher. Between 1700 and 1850, the note A varied between 415 and 429 [Hz]." *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Pitch."

¹⁵ "An important change took place around 1450 with the rise of the Flemish School. The bass voice was 'discovered,' and it was here for the first time that the texture of polyphonic music became separated into four different ranges,...The shift from 'a preference for high male voices in Western music' to 'a rapid growth of interest in the bass voice' can be understood not only as the emergence of new musical taste, but also

C₃ to F₃, inclusive.¹⁷ Polyphonic vocal music from the 13th to 16th Century, which added harmony to the monophony of earlier plainchant, typically had a tessitura from F₃ to C₅.¹⁸ A typical modern bass, for example, sings¹⁹ a full octave below the lowest pitch of most medieval polyphonic music and a fifth below the lowest note in the 12th Century Passion liturgy. The higher tessitura of ancient music validates the theory of the dropping male voice.

As the average pitch of men's voices in a given society grew deeper, albeit over the course of generations, how did that society and its composers view and make use of the expanded range? A society that had only heard a bass as an anomaly (if it all) would probably think nothing of a man singing high. Furthermore, women's voices would also have been higher on average; even if women had been permitted on stage, contraltos would have been very difficult to locate, necessitating male voices for upper harmonic parts. When a society's average pitch lowered, basses and contraltos became much more readily available; the basses served to undermine the countertenor's masculinity while the contralto had the potential to displace the countertenor in roles where gender was ambiguous or immaterial.

as a cultural change responding to biological adaptation." Moller, 248; Willi Apel, "Singing," in *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, (Cambridge, 1944), 681.

¹⁶ The 'Passion' is music liturgy that recounts Christ's death and resurrection, traditionally performed during Easter. The most celebrated is J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*.

¹⁷ Giles, 305.

¹⁸ Apel, 681; Moller, 245; s.v. "Polyphony" in *Oxford Dictionary of Music*.

¹⁹ Specifically, from E₂ to E₄. *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Basso." Pitch notation altered from [E to e'/f] to provide consistent notation.

The decline of the countertenor voice on the London stage is a story of displacement, rather than abrupt disappearance. Countertenors enjoyed a prominent place on the Restoration stage but were partially displaced in the early 18th Century by the more powerful and exotic castrati. The stage countertenor's informal link in the popular mind with the castrato catalyzed the voice's later displacement by more conventional voice types. Even before the castrati's arrival and continuing after their departure, contraltos increasingly encroached on male dominance in semi-stage roles, which served as a talent pool in which stage countertenors developed.²⁰ The clear physical distinction between a countertenor and a castrato, or a countertenor and a woman, makes those replacements relatively simple to research and demonstrate. The final displacement came in the form of heldentenors, men who, given different training and tastes, could have been countertenors. This incremental movement away from falsetto singing presents a unique documentary challenge, requiring a careful examination of musical criticism. The development of the heroic tenor and the push for higher notes in the full chest voice created a transition period beginning in the late 18th Century where falsetto singing continued, but was used less and as an increasingly marginalized voice.

The heroic tenor voice ascended for many of the same reasons that caused the eclipse of the countertenor voice. Earlier commentators characterized individual countertenor voices as "sweet"²¹ or "clear, full, melodious,"²² while later ones called the

²⁰ Giles, 75.

²¹ Giles, 100.

voice “feeble.”²³ The fact was not that audiences grew to dislike hearing grown men singing high notes, but that they wanted to hear those notes sung in an emphatically masculine manner. The 19th Century audience wanted an operatic hero whose voice reflected his power; they wanted nothing of mere masculine sweetness. Part of the audience’s desire for more powerful voices came from the increasing popularity and accessibility of opera: as music halls became larger, most countertenor voices had difficulty filling the space. Although this phenomenon of the powerful high male voice did not reach full fruition until Wagner created the true ‘heldentenor,’ the transition began as early as Handel’s period and accelerated as theaters became larger.²⁴

The ‘pure’ countertenor voice – that is, singing exclusively in the alto tessitura – dropped out of popular use on the London stage around 1780, approximately the middle of the period studied here.²⁵ However, after the countertenor disappeared from the stage, male singers continued to use extensive falsetto in their songs’ high passages,²⁶ as opposed to the heroic tenor’s practice of bringing the chest voice up to some of those

²² Specifically a description of Montfort by Colley Cibber. Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber: With an Historical View of the Stage During His Own Time*, ed. B.R.S. Fone (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 74-76.

²³ James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble*, 2 Vol. (no city or publisher listed, 1825). Quoted in Fiske, 270.

²⁴ Gerald Abraham, *The New Oxford History of Music*, Vol. VIII, (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14-20.

²⁵ George Mattocks, who quitted the stage in 1780, and Michael Leoni, who retired to Jamaica after 1788, were the last notable stage countertenors of London. Giles, 93, 85.

²⁶ Like many other critics before and after him, Leigh Hunt often remarked on the quality of a performer’s falsetto and his ease in a transition to it. Theodore Fenner, *Leigh Hunt and Opera Criticism: The “Examiner” Years 1808-1821* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1972), 94-95.

same notes. However, even the occasional use of falsetto became increasingly rare as heroic tenors became more and more popular. When it was used, it served to emphasize the heroic tenor's power through dynamic contrast. To simply dismiss this transition as a change in taste²⁷ fails to satisfy inquiry and begs the question: what caused this change in taste? Why did London's audiences, composers and performers collectively move away from falsetto singing?

On Sources

The principle documents that illuminate this transition are the writings of contemporary music critics and musically competent diarists who commented on the use of the falsetto voice. Even a composer's original manuscript score can tell only the range of a piece and directions for its singing; it neglects to indicate at what tone or time a singer should transition from chest voice to head voice, or from head voice to falsetto. Fortunately, performance practices were and continue to be noteworthy, and performance criticism often reveals not only whether a performer transitioned to falsetto, but how the reviewer described the voice – sweet, shrill, full, feeble, thin. How an audience or particular reviewer received the use of falsetto helps illuminate why the voice disappeared, and by reflection, helps reveal the society's values and ideas on gender.

²⁷ For a general commentary on the frequent divorce between musical and societal factors in music history, see John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 8-14. Although Giles' work is the definitive resource on the history of the countertenor voice, its societal interpretation for the voice's decline is lacking.

The profession of the music critic grew as the countertenor voice declined, but had yet to mature in late 17th and early 18th Century London,²⁸ perhaps because the idea of the performer as a celebrity was still developing.²⁹ The absence of the professional critic certainly complicates a survey of the views of the theater-going public concerning the merits and masculinity of the stage countertenor. The diaries of John Evelyn (1620-1706) and Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) offer crucial insight into performance perceptions when published music criticism was still decades from emerging. Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele wrote and edited *The Tatler* (1709-1711), *The Spectator* (1711-1714) and *The Guardian* (1713), which were all miscellany and essay periodicals in the early 18th Century. Although these periodicals lacked proper musical criticism, they nonetheless offer valuable insight into one segment of society's ideas on voice, nationality and masculinity. The writings of Dr. Charles Burney, most notably *A General History of Music* (1789), were among the first in England to qualify as outright music criticism. Even then, regular musical criticism in periodical form did not come until several years later. Leigh Hunt wrote in such a capacity for the *Examiner* from 1808 to 1821. J.W. Davison's prolific music criticism for the *Times* from 1846-1879 was sufficiently

²⁸Harry Haskell, editor, *The Attentive Listener: Three Centuries of Music Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), XIII. For exhaustive coverage of the historical music critic in London, see:

Sarah Joiner Wynn, *The Emergence of the Music Critic in Late 18th Century London: Composers, Performers, Reporters* (Memphis: Langford & Assoc, 2001).

²⁹Cibber's *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, first published in 1740, is the first memoir of its kind because the idea of 'actor as celebrity' was only beginning to take hold, and had yet to do so in the 1690's. See Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24.

noteworthy to earn him a citation in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*.³⁰ That same reference work calls the music criticism of George Bernard Shaw “arguably the most brilliant in the language.”³¹

The gulf dividing the professional music critic and the theater-going public is not so great that they cannot be regarded as one in the same, at least for the purpose of this paper. The public’s collective thought on a work or performer was most widely molded by the popular music critic, next to their immediate perception of the performance itself. A published critic also relied on the public for support, and would have little of that if his views consistently antagonized his readership. While the difference between critic and audience in a given age was not so great, the gulf between the interpretations of different social classes has the potential to be much greater. Different classes espoused different values, and the competition of these class values played into the eclipse of the countertenor. Class had a marked influence on both the direction of theater and its perception by the critics, the audience’s demographics moving from aristocratic dominance in the Restoration and toward a broader spectrum as time progressed.³² Evelyn, Pepys and Burney were more inclined to aristocratic taste, including the Italian opera, while Addison and Steele were generally antagonistic toward it. Comparing each

³⁰ *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. “Davison, James William.”

³¹ *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. “Shaw, George Bernard.”

³² John Loftis, “The Social and Literary Context: Drama and Society,” in *The Revels History of Drama in English*, ed. T.W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1976), 5:38-40; Leo Hughes, *The Drama’s Patron’s: A Study of the Eighteenth Century London Audience* (Austin: University of Texas, 1971); Harry William Pedicord, “The Changing Audience,” in *The London Theatre World, 1660-1800*, ed Robert D. Hume (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 236-252.

of these critic's comments on music and on the men who sang it gives insight into the underlying causes behind the disappearance of the countertenor voice.

From the Restoration to Handel

Previous countertenor scholarship has asserted that the decline of the countertenor voice did not begin until the mid to late 18th Century, and while that may be true statistically, it neglects the origins of that decline and the earlier period in which they occurred.³³ The two voices – castrati and contraltos - which most brought about the disappearance of the 'pure' countertenor from the London stage both entered with the Restoration or soon thereafter. In the same period, the countertenor voice became inextricably associated with a group of ideas including the aristocratic fop, the homosexual and the castrato, all of whom were quite unpopular by the time of Handel's career, and whose popularity only diminished thereafter.

After a protracted period of small, clandestine theaters under the Commonwealth, London's theater world resurged during the Restoration, bringing change with its resurrection. Most notably, women appeared on the public stage for the first time,³⁴ and the musical stage assumed new importance.³⁵ Henry Purcell rose as the period's preeminent composer, transforming English theater music from a literally incidental art

³³ Giles, 93.

³⁴ Giles, 53-54; John Harley, *Music in Purcell's London* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1968), 122-123.

³⁵ "Hence has Musick of late sought its principle Glory in Theatres..." Thomas Salmon, *A proposal to perform musick in perfect and mathematical proportions*, 1688. Quoted in Harley, 118.

form³⁶ to one that stood on its own merit. Purcell, a countertenor himself, wrote many of his operatic parts for countertenor voice in either a male or female role.³⁷

The spring of 1689 saw the performance of Purcell's first true opera³⁸ at a girl's boarding school in Chelsea, performed 'By Young Gentlewomen.'³⁹ *Dido and Aeneas*'s cross-dressing and gender role reversal were typical of Restoration musical theater protocol.⁴⁰ Young women certainly played male parts in the first casting,⁴¹ and Purcell may have taken one of the female roles.⁴² Before he was deposed, Charles II had banned men imitating women on stage,⁴³ but the King himself evidently took little heed of his own edict, and London's actors took still less, as Colley Cibber relates:

The King coming a little before his usual time to a Tragedy, found the Actors not ready to begin...the Master of the Company came to the Box...fairly told his

³⁶ That is, the 'incidental music' which often accompanied or preceded a play. s.v. "Incidental Music" in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*. Jack Westrup proposes that the strong English tradition of plays retarded the growth of English musical theater. Jack Westrup, *Purcell*, revised by Nigel Fortune (London: Dent, 1980), 104-14. See also Curtis Alexander Price, *Henry Purcell and the London Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 4

³⁷ Giles, 65.

³⁸ That is, having song in place of dialogue. Most English operas, both before and after *Dido*, were more akin to musicals, interspersing songs between dialogue.

³⁹ Price, 225.

⁴⁰ John Franceschina, *Homosexualities in the English Theatre: From Lyly to Wilde* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 116-122.

⁴¹ Price, 225.

⁴² Giles, 67-69. Giles notes that there is considerable disagreement about whether Purcell played a female part in the opera, but it is certain that other Restoration countertenors engaged in such staged gender switches.

⁴³ Giles, 68.

Majesty that the Queen was not *shav'd* yet: The King...accepted the Excuse, which served till the male Queen cou'd be effeminated.⁴⁴

Perhaps the King took the excuse as a joke, but this anecdote nevertheless reveals that cross-dressing was quite common and accepted on Purcell's stage.

In addition to the frequent displays of gender ambiguity, the Restoration stage reflected the licentiousness of the court. Aphra Behn, a female Restoration playwright, penned the following lines in *The Town Fop* (1676):

Sir Tim: What, art thou Italianiz'd, and lovest thy own Sex?
Bel: I'm for any thing that's out of the common Road of Sin; I love a Man that will be damn'd for something: to creep by slow degrees to Hell, as if he were afraid the World shou'd see which way he went, I scorn it, 'tis like a Conventicler.⁴⁵

The passage alludes not only to the licentious morality some Restoration Englishmen professed, but also to a curious euphemism that equated Italians and heterodox sexuality.⁴⁶ It was upon this stage of gender ambiguity and libertine morality that the Restoration countertenor performed.

The frequent employment of the countertenor voice in stage, concert and church settings suggests that it found widespread acceptance, especially during the early Restoration.⁴⁷ John Evelyn's extensive journals reveal much about the contemporary

⁴⁴ Cibber, 71.

⁴⁵ Aphra Behn, *Complete Works*, ed. Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), 3: 64; quoted in Franceschina, 128.

⁴⁶ This euphemism was widespread in its use: "Damned fashion! Imported from Italy amidst a train of other unnatural vices. Have we not sins enough of [our own, but we must eke 'em out with those of] foreign nation...?" 1749 anonymous pamphlet, *Satan's Harvest Home*, quoted in Franceschina, 205.

⁴⁷ Giles, 55-65.

(1682) view of the countertenor: “After supper, came in the famous trebble Mr. Abell newly return’d from Italy, & indeede I never heard a more excellent voice, one would have sworne it had ben a Woman’s it was so high, & so well & skillfully manag’d.”⁴⁸

The playwright William Congreve claimed that Abell “certainly sings beyond all creatures upon earth.”⁴⁹ The first account might be received as mildly surprising in a modern context because it candidly associates a countertenor’s voice and a woman’s without addressing, much less questioning, the singer’s masculinity. Both commentators were predisposed by either class (upper) or profession (theatrical) to be receptive to a performing countertenor; a representative middle-class reaction would probably have been less favorable.

John Pate was remarkable for his countertenor voice and unruly disposition, taking many ‘female’ roles in Purcell’s operas and semi-operas. Pate played Mopsa⁵⁰ in the 1692 production of *The Fairy Queen* and took a similar role in *The Island Princess* in 1699. He took yet another female vocal role in Purcell and Dryden’s *The Indian Emperor*. During a trip to France, he was incarcerated in the Bastille for manslaughter and sentenced to be broken on the wheel, but managed to return to England unscathed to sing another day. Sing he did: “Mr Pate (having recover’d his Voice) will perform

⁴⁸ Entry for 27 Jan. 1682, John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E.S. De Beer (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), 4: 270.

⁴⁹ William Congreve, *Literary Relicks*, 1792 (letter dated 10 December 1700) quoted in Giles, 61.

⁵⁰ The Clown and Mopsa was a comic pair from English theatrical tradition involving a Clown and a grotesque maiden. Giles, 69.

several songs in Italian and English.”⁵¹ Pate represents the typical countertenor from Purcell’s day, and received the typical public reception. The works in which he performed were aimed almost exclusively at an aristocratic audience, which was more receptive to the stylized drama.⁵² He was typecast into certain roles, specifically female comic characters, and had a fairly successful career in those roles.⁵³

The profession of acting had never held the highest esteem in English society, and if the stage countertenor of the early 18th Century was ever derided, it was as an actor first and a countertenor second. As English society’s collective consciousness began to seize upon the idea of the ‘third gender,’ that of the effeminate homosexual, the sexual suspicion that had always surrounded actors became more specific and intense, and any superfluous feminine attributes of which actors could divest themselves – long haired wigs, extravagant foppish clothing, a high, sweet voice – began to fall out of favor by the theater-going public’s implicit demand.⁵⁴ Even before the Commonwealth, the morality of the stage had been quite controversial:

A man enfeebled in all his joynts, resolved into a more than womanish effeminacy, whose art is to speake with his hands and gestures, comes forth upon the Stage: and for this one, I know not whom, *neither man nor woman*, the whole citie flocke together, that so the fabulous lusts of antiquity may be acted. Yea, men... are *unmanned* on the Stage: all the honour and vigour of their sex is

⁵¹ Drury Lane Concert Announcement, quoted in Giles, 70.

⁵² “...the audiences of the Restoration were drawn almost exclusively from the upper classes. On four occasions Pepys recorded as an exception the presence of citizens in the theatre... The pits and boxes were occupied by noblemen, with the fops, beaux and wits who were their hangers-on...” Harley, 119-120; see also Pedicord.

⁵³ Giles, 69-70.

⁵⁴ Straub, 48

emmenated with the shame, the dishonesty of an unsinued body. He who is most womanish and best resembles the female sex, gives best content.⁵⁵ [Italics mine]

The stage of the Restoration only continued to draw such criticism. More than a retroactive academic description for the origins of the effeminate homosexual, the construct and terminology of the ‘third gender’ was already in place before the Restoration: “...this one, I know not whom, neither man nor woman.”

The author of the above theatrical criticism could very well have presented James Nokes as the poster child for the stage’s promotion of immorality. Nokes was a Restoration actor and comedian, most notable for his fop characters. Perhaps in an attempt to equal his reputation for humor, his satirists were less than kind, writing the following warning of him:

You smockfac’d Lads, Secure your Gentle Bums
For full of Lust and Fury See he comes!
‘Tis B[ugger] Nokes, whose unwieldy [tarse]
Weeps to be buryed in his Foreman’s [arse].⁵⁶

Going exclusively by rumor and satirical verse, one can only guess the legitimacy of his being known as “Bugger” Nokes. However, the same accusations leveled at Nokes were frequently repeated against other actors typecast as fops.⁵⁷ The satire of Nokes and its context reveals that both Restoration actors and fops were sexually suspect, and how much more so foppish actors.

⁵⁵The pamphlet was written in 1632. William Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix: The Player’s Scourge*, 1:168; quoted in Straub, 34-35.

⁵⁶ Montague Summers, *The Playhouse of Pepys* (London: Hegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1935), 56. Quoted in Franceschina, 118.

⁵⁷ Franceschina, 118.

In the decades after the Glorious Revolution, English society moved away from a relatively dichotomous model of gender – the male and the female – and constructed a new gender, the effeminate homosexual.⁵⁸ Before the social construct of the ‘third gender,’ those who were suspected of engaging in homosexual activity may have been castigated as lustful sinners performing shameful deeds, but they retained their essential identity as men. An accusation of a man’s debauchery with a woman – being called a pimp, rogue, or whoremaster – carried the force of scandalous invective in the late 17th and early 18th Century. As the concept of the effeminate male homosexual took hold in London’s collective mind, however, legal suits for such insults ceased; fornication lost much of its previous stigma and served as a proof positive against suspicions of homosexuality.⁵⁹ As foppery became an element in the developing construct of the male homosexual, actors who were type-cast into the role of a fop were especially suspect.⁶⁰ Evelyn’s description of Abell’s voice demonstrated the early innocuous association between a countertenor’s voice and a woman’s, but the days were numbered when a countertenor might be evaluated purely on the aesthetic merit of his voice.

⁵⁸ Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1-22. Other important works on the evolving nature of gender from the Restoration to the 19th Century in English society include: Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ Trumbach, 49-58.

⁶⁰ Straub, 54-59.

The countertenor voice was never the very epitome of London's masculine persona, but with the rise of the idea of the fop, it received much more criticism. Even a complimentary critic associated the countertenor voice with a woman's, and those intent on mocking foppery thought it effeminate. In 1709, fifteen years after the death of Purcell, *The Female Tatler* had this to say of fops and countertenors:

*Effeminate Fops, that drink Milk and Water, wear Cherry colour'd Stockings and Stitch'd Wast-coats and in a Counter-tenor Voice, complain of Vapours and the Spleen; impudent Beau-Jews that talk obscenely in modest Women's Company, then stare 'em in the Face, and burst out a laughing, who, so far from being admitted into Civil society, ought to be expell'd the Nation.*⁶¹

The above passage concisely articulates one perspective from early 18th Century London's discourse on masculinity, associating the countertenor voice with effeminacy. Discourse is merely talk, not reality; however, it can shape future reality. *The Female Tatler* spoke for much of the middle class, and expressed an increasingly articulate opposition to aristocratic manners, morals and character.

As the 1709 excerpt from the *Female Tatler* demonstrated, the association of the countertenor with the sickly, effeminate, rude, extravagantly-dressed fop was extant even when the stage countertenor was in his halcyon days. Addison further articulates this association between character, gender and voice in the following passage from 1710:

...There is another Musical Instrument, which is more frequent in this Nation than any other; I mean your Bass-Viol, which grumbles in the Bottom of the Consort, and with a surly Masculine Sound, strengthens the Harmony, and tempers the Sweetness of the several Instruments that play along with it. The Bass-Viol is an Instrument of a quite different Nature to the Trumpet, and may signifie Men of rough Sense, and unpolished Parts, who do not love to hear themselves talk, but sometimes break out with an agreeable Bluntness, unexpected Wit, and surly

⁶¹ *The Female Tatler*, No. 3 (13 July), quoted as footnote in *The Tatler*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1: 200.

Pleasantry, to the no small Diversion of their Friends and Companions. In short, I look upon every sensible, true-born *Britain*, to be naturally a Bass-Viol.”⁶²

Addison resoundingly connects masculinity with the “bottom of the consort,” going so far as to make tone a metaphor for national character. The nature of English national character was contentious in the early 18th Century: would the masculine English man be more akin to the cavalier or to the industrious businessman?

It seems incongruous that these statements which equate the masculine sound with the lower voices, and equate the effeminate, extravagantly dressed fop with the countertenor voice would come in the midst of a period when the countertenor voice still enjoyed widespread acceptance. If the voice was indeed disparaged so, why did it last another 70 years? Societal movements rarely occur instantaneously, and the disparagement the countertenor voice suffered in the early 18th Century is better understood in the context of class during that period. Addison’s *The Tatler* and the host of other essay periodicals that imitated it appealed primarily to London’s middle class,⁶³ in many ways representing the emerging middle class sentiment and morality. These periodicals did not yet represent a hegemonic discourse; *The Tatler* was counterculture. In that context, the dichotomy between the common public discourse and the reality on stage becomes more understandable. The attitudes expressed in the essay periodicals were those of a smaller segment of society whose ideals gradually came to be the status quo and dominate London’s collective conscience and cultural ideology.

⁶² *The Tatler* no. 153, April 1, 1710.

⁶³ Donald F. Bond, ed. *The Tatler*, (London: Clarendon, 1987), 1: ix.

Societal constructs of gender and voice take place in the larger context of class and politics. After a decade of Puritan ‘utopia’ under the Commonwealth, England’s nobility eagerly welcomed the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. They also welcomed the new mode of morality that followed him home from France, as described in vulgar satire:

Peace is his aim, his gentleness is such
And love he loves, for he loves fucking much
Nor are his high desires above his strength
His scepter and his prick are of a length;
And she may sway the one who plays with th’ other
And make him little wiser than his brother.⁶⁴

Much to the consternation of England’s pious middle-class Protestants, many aristocrats imitated the King, flaunting the renewal and expansion of liberties that were frequently less than Christian. In reaction, the middle class constructed the fop as a farce of the aristocratic libertine, imagining a gaudily dressed, effeminate nobleman who represented the very antithesis of the middle-class ideal. In physical terms, he ate a feeble diet, was frail, psychosomatic, and high-voiced. In terms of character, he was impudent, obscene, inarticulate, rude, and heretical.⁶⁵

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 repudiated the societal model that Charles II had imported and his brother perpetuated. With the increased opportunity for middle-class participation in politics that followed, certain virtues became increasingly important. With the shift from the court to the parliament as the center of political power came the

⁶⁴*The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth (London, 1968), 61; quoted in W.A. Speck, *Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England: Ideology, Politics and Culture, 1680-1820* (New York: Longman, 1998), 32.

⁶⁵ Compare these character traits with the description given in *The Female Tatler* quote.

shift in archetypical English masculinity from the courtier – in essence, the libertine fop – to the no-nonsense, eloquent member of Parliament.⁶⁶ Although it took more than a century to truly take hold, the voice as the masculine embodiment of power would eventually demand a voice deeper and more powerful than a countertenor's.

Aristocratic amusements, especially those that were perceived as foreign, extravagant, or overly ornate, gradually fell into stylistic disfavor with this shift in political power. The Italian opera was chief among these amusements, being foreign, extravagant *and* ornate. The castrati who graced its stage not only associated the countertenor voice with these aristocratic faults, but with the castrati themselves.

If the countertenor's voice had been vaguely effeminate before, the castrati made it explicitly so. Their invasion of London's opera scene early in 1707⁶⁷ initiated the greatest challenge to the countertenor voice, but the nature of that challenge was nothing if not complicated. The castrati displaced countertenors to varying degrees in Italian opera and oratorios, but not in English musical stage. The injection of a novel high-culture theater, complete with the exoticism of a eunuch, effected a backlash in English Opera toward the more common, popular and vulgar. John Gay's 1728 *The Beggar's Opera* provides the first and prime example of such a polarization. Italian opera frequently used mythological or classical themes as libretto material, applying contrived thoughts and sentiment in both the plot and the indecipherable libretto. *The Beggar's Opera* made due with a rogue highwayman for a hero and substituted bawdy innuendo set

⁶⁶ Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 26-27.

⁶⁷ Castrati performed in London more than a decade before they were featured in the Italian opera. Giles, 57, 73; Burney, 666.

to music for unintelligible warbling. Scorning the Italian opera's ornately composed and orchestrated arias, Gay used popular ballads and re-wrote their lyrics to suit the plot.⁶⁸

The *Beggar's Opera* redefined London's musical stage, irreconcilably divorcing the low from the high.

The immense popularity of *The Beggar's Opera* served both to prove the unpopularity of the Italian opera and to make it even less popular. Handel, who had made much of his living writing Italian opera, certainly found the situation vexing, and wrote oratorios to supplement his income. As oratorios are only partly dramatic, and often have a series of narrators as opposed to characters, the gender or non-gender of the performers was comparatively less important.

Generally isolated though they were in theater roles, countertenors and castrati did compete in the oratorio.⁶⁹ Although it has been suggested that the castrati made the countertenor voice sound insipid, Handel wrote only two solo oratorio roles explicitly for castrati; all others were left open for the best available vocalist.⁷⁰ The casting of an English countertenor in an operatic role that had premiered with a castrato contradicts the theory of the castrati's innate superiority⁷¹ and Handel himself thought certain

⁶⁸ A.H. Scouten, "Plays and Playwrights," in *The Revels History of Drama in English, Vol. V 1660-1770* (London: Methuen, 1976), 5: 235-238; Edmond McAdoo Gagey, *Ballad Opera* (London: Benjamin Blom, 1937), 34-52.

⁶⁹ "Strictly, a music setting of a religious libretto for solo singers, chorus, and orchestra, in dramatic form but usually performed without scenery or costumes in concert-hall or church... Later oratorios, in concert-form, were written by... Handel (esp. *Messiah*, the most popular of all oratorios)." *Oxford Dictionary of Music* s.v. "Oratorio."

⁷⁰ Giles, 80.

⁷¹ Leoni played Arbaces in the 1775 revival of *Artaxerxes*. Giles, 85.

countertenors “equal to the [castrati]” in oratorio roles.⁷² Handel, like most Baroque composers, was concerned less with the gender or non-gender of his performers than he was with the singer’s voice, an outlook consistent with a society having a lesser degree of gender rigidity.⁷³ A castrato did replace a countertenor in London’s early Italian opera, but for the most part, such competition on stage was rare, owing mostly to the division of the stages into Italian and English.⁷⁴ While the castrati remained in London’s music culture, each voice type had its particular niche, which occasionally overlapped, but neither was hegemonic. The countertenor voice suffered most not from displacement by or competition with the castrati; it suffered from a damning association, aural and gendered, with men who were less than men.

The castrati were not the only vocalists with whom countertenors had to compete. Long before the invasion of the Italian eunuchs, women had taken to the stage in singing roles. Pepys records women in operatic roles in 1665 and 1667, three and five years, respectively, after King Charles II permitted them on stage.⁷⁵ Even though women had gained the privilege of appearing on stage, there remained considerable impediments to female participation in the musical stage, as Charles Burney noted:

⁷² Quoted in Frederic Hodgeson, ‘The Contemporary Alto,’ *The Musical Times*, April 1965, 294; quoted in Giles, 74.

⁷³ Although the German-born, Italian trained composer can hardly be said to represent much of London society’s views on gender.

⁷⁴ A Mr. Hughes sang in the first Italian Opera performed in England, *Arsinoe Queen of Cyprus*. Burney, 655, 666.

⁷⁵ Robert Latham, *The Shorter Pepys* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 547 (31 Oct. 1665), 820 (5 May 1668).

...There are few instances of vocal performers, especially female, being brought on our stage, but by accident. The fear of seduction, profligacy, and the world's opinion, deters parents from educating their children with a view to a profession, which nothing but uncommon success and prudence, can render honorable in the eyes of the most serious part of the nation.⁷⁶

Those women who did venture forth upon the early Restoration stage did not replace countertenors, for the Commonwealth had allowed minimal theater activity. Most of the competition between women and countertenors that effected the ultimate eclipsing of the voice occurred in semi-stage roles. Women successfully competed with both countertenors and castrati for oratorio solo positions. The original 1742 Dublin performance of *Messiah* split the oratorio's alto solos between a countertenor, William Lamb, and a contralto, Susanna Cibber. Mrs. Cibber, who was conducting a public love affair at the time,⁷⁷ so moved Rev. Dr. Delany with her performance of 'He was Despised' that he shouted "Woman, for this thy sins be forgiven thee!"⁷⁸ In the many performances of *Messiah*, Handel routinely changed performers – male, female, and castrated male – based on his idea of the best performance.⁷⁹

From Purcell to Handel, the countertenor voice remained an important element of the London musical stage. During that period, however, the countertenor faced a double challenge, first from castrati and then from contraltos. Although the castrati never

⁷⁶ Even though Burney published his book in 1789, it is a book of music history, and the quote here eminently applicable to the Restoration and early 18th Century. Burney, 983.

⁷⁷ Fiske, 624.

⁷⁸ Giles, 75-76; Fiske, 624; *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Cibber, Mrs. Susanna."

⁷⁹ Giles, 75.

directly competed with countertenors on the English stage, they limited the countertenor's employment off-stage; more importantly, the castrati tainted the idea of the high male voice for London's theater-going public. Female contraltos remained to compete with countertenors in a wide variety of roles and to shift the public's perception of how an alto voice should sound. The countertenor voice would remain on the London stage for several decades after Handel's death in 1759 but the roots of its decay were laid before his London arrival in 1711.

The events and trends preceding the death of Handel were largely responsible for the eclipse of the stage countertenor. Addison's articulation of the true Briton's voice foreshadowed the disappearance of a voice that was, ironically enough, quintessentially British. The principle causes for the stage countertenor's decline existed in the voice's prime, and had only to be fully expressed.

Leigh Hunt and Rise of the Heldentenor

The trends that began in the late 17th and early 18th Century played out through the beginning of the 19th Century. After several decades of slow decline, the pure countertenor voice fell into complete disuse on London's stage by 1790.⁸⁰ The shift from the use of the countertenor voice to the mixed use of falsetto and chest voice requires a similar shift of attention to the perception of the falsetto voice. The critics in the early years of the 19th Century reflected a transitional stage of thought towards the falsetto register. They still lauded the tone quality, but complained of how the singer arrived at it.

⁸⁰ Giles, 92, 93-94.

Critics still complimented the tone of a skillful falsetto, but gave rave reviews to those tenors who managed to sing equally high without resorting to falsetto.

Contemporary critics painted a clear picture of one of the period's last pure countertenors, and in doing so lend evidence of why he was the last. George Mattocks (1738-1804) had a beautiful countertenor voice, as described in 1766:

Whose tender strain, so delicately clear,
Steals, ever honied, on the heaviest ear;
With sweet-toned softness exquisitely warms,
Fires without force, and without vigour charms.⁸¹

The poetical critique admires Mattock's voice for its "fire" despite the absence of "force." Like the innocent comparison of the countertenor voice with woman's, the candid confession of the voice's lack of force prophetically named the very cause of the voice's decline. Another critic's compliments were rather backhanded: "We are often led to imagine, that we are listening to the notes of a *Castrato*, than to those of a British singer."⁸² To be sure, the comparison of the mere voice is flattering, but the implicit comparison of emasculated masculinity boded ill for the countertenor voice. Mattocks gave his last London performance in 1784.

Leigh Hunt was a music critic who associated closely with British Romantic poets of the Cockney school. In addition to criticizing opera, Hunt had a voice:

of extraordinary compass, power, flexibility, and beauty...there were no "passages" that he could not execute; the quality was sweet, clear, and ringing... [He] delighted to repeat airs pleasing or plaintive; and if he would occasionally fling himself into the audacious revels of Don Giovanni, he preferred to be Lindoro or Don Ottavio; and still more, by the help of his falsetto, to dally with the tender treble of the Countess in *Figaro*, or Polly in *Beggars' Opera* [sic].⁸³

⁸¹ Hugh Kelly, *Thespis*, 1766; quoted in Fiske, 634

⁸² *The Theatrical Biographer*; quoted in Fiske, 634.

If any critic would be receptive to falsetto singing, it would be one who loved to sing operatic passages in his own falsetto. Even so, Hunt's writing displays the beginnings of antipathy towards the falsetto voice. Although he complimented the falsetto itself, he also complained of singers who demonstrate an obvious break or gurgle in their voice as they transition between registers:

[Pearman's] falsetto will remind the public of Incledon's which it surpasses in reach and sweetness. He plays upon it like a flute. His transition to it however from the natural voice is not happy. It is not indeed so violent as Incledon's who in his leap from one to the other slammed the larynx in his throat, like a Harlequin jumping through a window shutter; but it is poor and unskillful; neither does he seem to care upon what sort of words or expressions he does it, so as the note is such as he can jump to. [13 July 1817]⁸⁴

To achieve the 'breakless' transition to falsetto that Hunt desires, the natural voice must be softened and shaded several notes before the break, and the transition to falsetto accomplished at a significantly lower pitch than the highest note possible in natural voice. These violent transitions were likely caused by extending the power of the natural voice as high as possible, which suggests an increasing infatuation with a powerful and unmistakably masculine voice. Hunt supports the premise of more violent, less *bel canto* singing in writing of Charles Incledon:

...there is a tendency in almost all singers, private as well as public...to put on a sort of noisy fierceness...to bully the air they are singing. It arises perhaps in the first instance only from the sense of the goodness of the music, and a wish to send their voices well out of their throats. ...it is curious to see how it will cut up all expression, and with what a neck-stretching loftiness a singer will go through some of the tenderest or liveliest passages. Mr. Incledon carried this error to its extreme. He would be as nice and delicate as he could manage when he was in a

⁸³ "A man of Letters of the Last Generation," *Cornhill Magazin* (Jan., 1860), I, 85-95; quoted in Theodore Fenner, *Leigh Hunt and Opera Criticism: The "Examiner" Years, 1808-1821* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1972), 40-41.

⁸⁴ Fenner, 95.

piece of falsetto, but he appeared to seize with triumph the first opportunity of escaping, and if the end in particular of a song gave him the least encouragement, would dash out into a slay-footed uproariousness quite defying. [30 March 1817].⁸⁵

Although falsetto singing was still accepted and widely employed, it was used as a less-preferred voice, and out of necessity rather than preference. When some tenors managed to cultivate a style of singing that omitted the sweeter tone of falsetto, they quickly put the new style of singing into practice.

The prototypical heldentenor rose soon before Hunt's period and helped shape the voices of which Hunt wrote. London's debut of the first falsetto-free stage tenor (1787)⁸⁶ and retirement of its last stage countertenor (1788)⁸⁷ were little more than a year apart. Michael Kelly thrilled audiences in London, Vienna and elsewhere with his complete omission of falsetto and powerful natural voice. One music critic wrote: "His compass was extraordinary. In vigorous passages he never cheated the ear with feeble wailings of falsetto, but sprung upon the ascending fifth with a sustained energy that electrified the audience."⁸⁸ Mozart wrote the roles of Basilio and Curzio in *The Marriage of Figaro* for Kelly, who excelled in them both.⁸⁹ Kelly was both intrinsically significant, having an astonishing voice, and significant as the first in a new breed of singer. Although Kelly's impact was felt during Hunt's time of writing, the trend he initiated culminated in the style of operatic singing that George Bernard Shaw would later review.

⁸⁵ Fenner, 101.

⁸⁶ Fiske, 630.

⁸⁷ Giles, 85.

⁸⁸ Boaden, *Life of Kemble*, quoted in Fiske, 270.

⁸⁹ Oxford Dictionary of Music, s.v. "Kelly, Michael."

The rise of the heldentenor was not the only challenge to the countertenor; the contralto voice continued to encroach upon many traditionally countertenor roles. Many of the semi-stage roles where countertenors and contraltos competed served to develop voices for the London stage; even when women did not directly compete for stage roles, their displacement in the opera's talent pool affected the number and quality of countertenors available to the stage. One unemployed countertenor complained of the situation to a music trade periodical in 1836:

Permit me to draw your attention to a situation in which myself, and others who have the misfortune of being denominated counter-tenor singers, are placed by the introduction of female contraltos in most of the festivals and concerts instead of the legitimate [male] altos. For instance, not one of us is engaged at the forthcoming festivals at the Exeter Hall.⁹⁰

An account of the 1834 Handel Commemoration further suggests cyclical deterioration in the countertenor's training and employment: "There being no good counter-tenor, the song 'He was Despised,' which is generally given to that voice, was given to a female contralto."⁹¹

Even though displacement by contraltos in concert and oratorio roles obviously did not directly displace those who still used extensive falsetto in musical theater, it did alter the public's ear, informing it of how a man should *not* sound. Hunt's era saw the disappearance of falsetto as a legitimate solo voice. When a vocalist did use falsetto voice, he did so because he simply could not reach a note in full voice, for comic effect, or to accent his 'real' voice.

⁹⁰ *The Musical Times*, quoted without citation in Michael Hardwick and Mollie Hardwick, *A Singularity of Voice*, (New York: Praeger, 1968), 91.

⁹¹ Lord Mount Edgumbe, *Musical Reminiscences*, 4th ed., (London: no publisher, 1843), 281; quoted in Giles, 101.

George Bernard Shaw and the Dominance of the Heldentenor

George Bernard Shaw wrote musical criticism on the London stage across the span of seven decades, describing in lucid prose an art form that frequently eludes description. Although it is clear that the pure countertenor voice had been absent for some time, falsetto singing continued intermittently. When he encountered it, Shaw generally criticized falsetto singing. Otherwise, his writings serve to demonstrate the culmination of trends in musical theater: the powerful tenor ruled.

The chief event of last week at Her Majesty's was the revival of Rossini's *Otello*, with Signor Tamberlik in the title *rôle*. . . . In order to represent the operatic *Otello* respectably, a voice and some faculty for acting are indispensable. Signor Tamberlik possesses neither of these qualifications. He sings in a doubtful falsetto. . . . For the C sharp in the celebrated duet *L'ira d'avverso fato*, he substituted a strange description of a shriek at about that pitch. The audience, ever appreciative of curiosities, eagerly redemanded it.⁹²

To comment on Shaw's criticism seems almost redundant. To use falsetto as a legitimate voice – one capable of expressing a wide range of emotions and ideas, including anger and power – had become outmoded. Bass, baritone, and tenor were the only male voice types accredited with this kind of legitimacy. In later writings, he emphasizes the importance of a powerful voice in being a successful vocalist:

From a column entitled "A Typical "Popular" Vocalist"
The purely musical portion of the task is of minor importance. If the song be English, the words must be pointedly delivered at the audience in a confidentially colloquial style. The pathetic parts should be drawled, and those notes made the most of which best display the power of the voice.⁹³

⁹² Music column from *The Hornet*, 20 June 1877. Bernard Shaw, *How to Become a Musical Critic*, ed Dan H. Lawrence (New York: Hill & Wang, 1961), 25

⁹³ 26 Sept 1877; Shaw, 43-44.

Again, to comment on Shaw's criticism belabors the point: successful vocalists in Shaw's day, especially male vocalists, had best emphasize the power of their voices. As a critic, Shaw expressed consternation at the overemphasis on power and the lack of appreciation for dynamic contrast and skill, as opposed to mere vocal bravado: "The audience, somewhat stunned by the stupendous [Bach] choruses, hardly appreciated the delicacy and subdued fervor of the airs and duets..."⁹⁴

Shaw, ever the astute observer, noted the impact that the decline the falsetto as a legitimate voice had upon those who might engage in a vocal career:

Nowadays, however, since the opera and the concert platform offer golden opportunities to a tenor or a baritone, whereas an alto or counter-tenor is confined to the choir or the glee quartet all his life, a promising choir boy gets rid of his treble as soon as Nature permits him. The effect of this in diminishing the number of adult [male] altos must be considerable.⁹⁵

The decline of the prevalence of countertenors and of the voice's legitimacy off stage surely impacted the public's readiness to accept falsetto as a legitimate voice on the stage. Furthermore, the professional male vocalist's disinclination to training as an alto could have only worsened the quality of the falsetto voice heard on stage, and increased the critic's and public's reluctance to hear it.

Even though falsetto singing had lost its position as a legitimate stage voice, it did retain certain critically acceptable uses. When falsetto was judiciously employed for dramatic impact, most critics and audiences welcomed it, a tendency that Shaw mentioned with some sarcasm:

⁹⁴ 28 March 1885, Shaw, 64.

⁹⁵ Shaw, quoted in Giles, 114.

Vocalists of the Season. Signor Fancelli.

Signor Fancelli is a fortunate man. He is a tenor with a voice. The time has been, and will be again, we hope, when no man could hold a leading position on the stage without varied artistic qualifications. At present a great deal of audacity, a little affectation, some judicious puffing, and sufficient lung power to make a noise at brief intervals for three hours or so compete the list of acquirements necessary for a *primo tenore*. If he be able to shout, he will do well to sing a bar or two occasionally in a light falsetto. The critics will fall into raptures over his exquisite management of the *mezza voce*,⁹⁶ and the public will follow the critics. If he cannot do this, he has only to be careful not to lapse into inoffensiveness.⁹⁷

Shaw's criticism of Fancelli gives a more nuanced understanding of the attitude toward the use of falsetto in the latter 19th Century. The singers of whom Shaw wrote used falsetto for contrast and to highlight the power of their mid range voices – suddenly popping into falsetto during a tender passage of an aria or duet, then roaring away with vocal histrionics. Such a pattern of employment differed greatly from that of 150 or 100 years ago, when a man would sing an entire song or every high passage in falsetto, employing it as a voice both primary and legitimate.

Writing specifically of English opera, Shaw found a similar rule of overpowered voices, even to the fault of ignoring dramatic cues that might suggest a specific style or volume:

English Opera at Drury Lane

[Opera singers] knock their voices about with their old confident colloquialism and toastmasterly magniloquence... They are not yet tired of tacking tawdry strips of obsolete *cadenza*⁹⁸ to the end of their songs, nor have they ceased to remind the judicious spectator, by their inveterate aping of the follies of the Italian lyric

⁹⁶ s.v. "Mezzo, mezza" in Oxford Dictionary of Music, 465: "half-voice, i.e. half the vocal... power possible."

⁹⁷ 27 June 1877, Shaw, 29.

⁹⁸ s.v. "cadenza" in *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 118: "A flourish (properly, improvised) inserted into the final cadence of any section of a vocal aria..."

stage, of Artemus Ward's unlucky assumption of "an operatic voice" when serenading his sleeping wife.⁹⁹

The fascination with the powerful "operatic voice" overrode dramatic considerations.

Leading tenors of a previous era, and certainly countertenors,¹⁰⁰ might have been more receptive to the idea of a dynamic level and tone color appropriate to each situation.

Even though Shaw lamented the overemphasis on vocal power, a fault many associated with Wagner, Shaw idolized the composer's music and the style of singing he created.

With the single exception of Handel, no composer has written music so well calculated to make its singers vocal athletes as Wagner.... Instead of specializing his vocal parts after the manner of Verdi and Gounod for shrieking sopranos, goad-bleating tenors, and tremulous baritones with an effective compass of about a fifth at the extreme tiptop of their ranges, and for contraltos with chest registers forced all over their compass... he employs the entire range of the human voice, demanding from everybody nearly two octaves. The bulk of the work lies easily in the middle of the voice, which is nevertheless exercised all over, one part of it relieving the other healthily and continually. He uses the highest notes sparingly, and is ingeniously considerate in the matter of instrumental accompaniment.¹⁰¹

Though Shaw often complained of a vocalist's abuse of a powerful voice, he clearly admired its proper exercise. Shaw described a stage reversed from the Restoration, where ornate, beautiful music of hidden power appealed to those who were comparably adorned and wielded power in a similar fashion. In the two centuries between Purcell and Wagner, the operatic voice matched the shifting model of the hegemon. Power lost its velvet dressing, adopting a plainer, more emphatic and bourgeoisie garb. So followed

⁹⁹ 11 August 1885, Shaw, 65.

¹⁰⁰ In general, the less intuitive or natural an art, the more thought and consideration must be given to its execution.

¹⁰¹ Bernard Shaw, *Major Critical Essays* (St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, 1976), 274-75.

the voices that represented it, and how the disinherited resented the shift: “Royal personages, detesting [Wagner’s] music, sat out the performances in the row of boxes set apart for the princes....”¹⁰² So ended the transformation of power’s voice.

Cadenza

Most have been content to accept the countertenor’s meteoric decline as an anomaly, a bizarre artifact from a period whose very name means bizarre;¹⁰³ when examined as something discernable, however, it sheds light into many other areas of English history. It seems bizarre indeed that something so simple as the tone of a human voice could embroil such controversy and be caught amongst so many conflicting tides. The stage countertenor voice had the misfortune to be maligned as effeminate, associated with castrati, undermined by contraltos, and finally supplanted entirely in a *coupe d’grace* by the heroic tenor.

Like so many other efforts to establish historical trends, proving a particular pattern in the countertenor voice’s decline has the occasional difficulty of finding inconvenient evidence, which demands extraordinary efforts to reconcile with a larger paradigm. More difficult still is reconciling an outmoded paradigm with the evidence. Previous scholarship on the countertenor voice suggests a more sudden pattern of decline, being most notable around the end of the 18th Century, and fails to address the tenor’s extensive incorporation of falsetto.¹⁰⁴ While that pattern may be statistically accurate, it ignores the

¹⁰² Shaw, *Essays*, 271.

¹⁰³ Baroque literally means bizarre in French. Oxford Dictionary of Music, s.v. “Baroque.”

importance of the attitudes that catalyzed such a sudden change, and which were developing from the re-opening of the theaters in 1660. Dietary changes in the English populace, the popular aristocratic licentiousness that accompanied the Restoration, the curious aristocratic taste for eunuch Italian singers, the middle-class's equally strong but more enduring revulsion against aristocratic art and morality – all of these contrived to banish a particular voice from the stage for a time. But even in the broad impact of these and others factors, the complete exclusion of falsetto singing would constitute a situation too simple and too readily explained. The use of falsetto in opera survived first of habit and necessity, then for the sake of dynamic contrast. On the whole, the popular voice of each era reflected the linked ideals of power and masculinity.

*Afterpiece*¹⁰⁵

My object all sublime
 I shall achieve in time--
 To let the punishment fit the crime--
 The punishment fit the crime;
 And make each prisoner pent
 Unwillingly represent
 A source of innocent merriment!
 Of innocent merriment!
 All prosy dull society sinners,
 Who chatter and bleat and bore,¹⁰⁶
 Are sent to hear sermons
 From mystical Germans
 Who preach from ten till four.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Giles, 93-95.

¹⁰⁵ Following the tradition of London's 18th Century theaters, this section will be a **willful misinterpretation** of the text of "Let the Punishment Fit the Crime" from W.S. Gilbert's libretto for the *Mikado*.

¹⁰⁶ Dull society sinners here meaning libertine fops.

The amateur tenor, whose vocal villainies
 All desire to shirk,
 Shall, during off-hours,
 Exhibit his powers¹⁰⁸
 To Madame Tussaud's waxwork

Exeunt

¹⁰⁷ A mere six hours is much too short for Wagner's complete Ring cycle.

¹⁰⁸ As has been repeated on countless occasion, the purpose of the late 19th Century tenor was to display his power to as many persons as possible.

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